TERRORISTS & TYRANTS:
MIDDLE EASTERN NORTH AFRICAN PERFORMERS GROSSLY UNDERREPRESENTED ON TELEVISION, NEW STUDY FINDS

With the 70th Annual PrimeTime Emmys this week, the first ever study of Middle Eastern North African, or MENA performers on PrimeTime TV points to a major gap in representation. With more than 9 million Americans from the Middle East and North Africa in the US (3.2 % of population), MENA actors comprise only 1 percent of regular actors, according to a new report, “Terrorists and Tyrants: Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Actors in Prime Time and Streaming Television.”

Most people thought the push for diversity would create an uptick in roles, but the opposite happened. I discovered that MENA performers were counted as Caucasian and unable to fill diverse hiring quotas. This hole in Hollywood’s inclusion practices led to devolving portrayals for many MENA performers. If we weren’t willing to be marginalized and reinforce dangerous stereotypes, our ability to work dramatically decreased.

- Azita Ghanizada, Actress, Founder MAAC

Hollywood under-hires MENA actors and limits the portrayals of MENA people to storylines of terrorist violence and religious tyranny. The report finds that, in the 2015-2016 television season, the majority of MENA characters (78%) appear as trained terrorists, agents, soldiers or tyrants.

In response to marginalization, stereotyping and a hostile U.S. political climate, MENA performers like Tony winner Ari’el Stachel have avoided identifying as MENA. In his Tony acceptance speech, Stachel admitted, “… for so many years of my life I pretended I was not a middle eastern person.” Representation matters as it allows for accurate portrayals and helps to eradicate the fear and shame associated with being MENA.

Hollywood needs to move beyond tyrants and terrorists when portraying MENAs. Such stereotypes can have harmful effects on audience perceptions. More complex and relatable MENA characters can counter anti-Muslim and anti-MENA sentiment and policies.

— Nancy Wang Yuen, co-author of “Terrorists and Tyrants” and author of “Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism”

FULL 2017 REPORT (attached, along with a one-sheet of major findings). The full report will be available for download on September 10, 2018 here: http://www.menaartsadvocacy.com

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About MAAC:
MENA Arts Advocacy Coalition (MAAC), was created in 2016 by actress Azita Ghanizada, after she was informed she was considered a Caucasian hire during the 2015 Television Networks Primetime pilot season. She realized that in the new world of diversity and inclusion, an entire region of the world was being erased in Hollywood, increasing the landscape for inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals for her and her fellow community of MENASA performers, including Arabs, Iranians, Assyrians, Turks, Chaldeans, Armenians and Israelis. It became no longer palatable to exist in Hollywood without a coalition that advocated for MENA actors and the increasing issues surrounding their images. She began reaching out to fellow MENA performers, Assaf Cohen Amir Talai and Amin El-Gamal. Together, they successfully began collecting their stories, gathering crucial data and effectively lobbied SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP to add MENA to its Casting Data Report, the first time a new casting category has been added in 37 years.